

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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Reflections in a Graveyard of Civilizations

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"Behold, how are the mighty fallen!" For three weeks we have visited the sepulchres of early civilizations in the land of Mesopotamia where lie buried eleven empires which had their day and crumbled to a dreary mosaic of dusty ruins and salty desolation.

Here in the alluvial plains of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, recent searchlights of archaeology reveal how for 7,000 years a portion of the human race went to school under successive conquering invaders, and left its records and handiwork. Fragments of these are still visible to-day in ruins, in museums, and in relics of abandoned irrigation projects. Prior to this schooling, the infancy of the human race goes back and fades away from our view into a mysterious antiquity, whose secrets are still withheld from the spade and microscope of modern excavators.

In this land, which suckled and nurtured a portion of the human race, is a traditional "Garden of Eden" where the Adam and Eve of ancient times lived without labor, as food gatherers of the wild fruits of the land. The supposed site of this primeval paradise is now a desert, void of trees and vegetation as if close shaved. We surprised an "Adam" of to-day, trying to bathe in a mud puddle left by the rain, without an available leaf to hide behind. Out of this land of Mesopotamia come the stories of the "Flood" and of Noah and the Ark, of Jonah and Nineveh, and of Daniel in the Lions' Den. One may see near Kirkuk what is reputed to be the fiery furnace into which the three children of Israel were flung, where natural gas escaping from the ground has been aflame for untold centuries.

The Biblical story of the "Flood" is verified by an excavated Chaldean tablet¹ as well as by strata of silt deposits left by one or more great inundations, which may have been combined in one legendary flood. We visited Kish, 20 miles from Babylon, which existed an estimated 800 years before the "Flood"² and was the first capital established after the water receded and man began to flourish again on this part of the earth. Here at Kish, a cross section of the excavation reveals layer upon layer of artifacts of vanished empires and civilizations, down to a layer of undisturbed silt, 30 inches thick. Below this level is found the remains of an earlier pre-deluvian culture which was interrupted by the "Great Flood." Remarkable painted pottery, buried below the mud layer, reveals an advanced culture in this otherwise unknown period of the infancy of mankind.

Kish to-day is a desolate group of mounds, inhabited only by foxes and jackals, which make their homes in the prospecting holes left by archaeologists. The great massive ziggurat or tower of mud bricks, with the mystery of the ages upon it and still defiant of the human and physical storms of the centuries which have beat upon it, stands neglected and lonely as a sphinx upon the plain.

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(1) Woolly C. Leonard. The Sumerians. Oxford, 1929. (2) Watelin, Ch. and S. Langdon. Excavations at Kish. Vol. IV. Paris, 1934.

Subdued as though at a funeral, we gazed upon all that remains of mighty Babylon, the greatest center of culture and civilization known to the ancient world. The only evidence of life in this once teeming city was a lean gray wolf, shaking his head as though annoyed by a tick in his ear, as he cast furtive glances our way and loped to his lair amongst the heaps of debris of one of the "Seven Wonders of the World"--the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon. How well are the predictions of Jeremiah fulfilled:

"And Babylon shall become heaps, a dwelling place.....
without an inhabitant."³

All these ancient cities have been ceaselessly pillaged throughout the centuries for their fine burned brick, which it is impossible to make now due to lack of fuel. The towns of Hilla and Baghdad have been largely built from these looted ancient brick.

Babylon, founded 6,000 years ago, was more than 3,000 years old when, at the feast of Belshazzar and a thousand of his Lords, "the handwriting on the wall" predicted its downfall. Impregnable, fortified, and richly stored with treasure and provisions as it was, yet it surrendered to Cyrus of Persia in B.C. 538, but remained a center of culture and luxury until it fell before the conquering army of Alexander the Great in B.C. 323. This brilliant soldier, who had conquered most of the known world by the age of 33, attempted to unite the east and west in Babylon, but he was cut off in his youth and died there, and became a part of the debris which is now Babylon. His successors moved the capital to the banks of the Tigris and Babylon fell into ruin.

"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall"⁴ warned the prophet. But Nebuchadnezzar of mighty Babylon, 2,600 years ago, boasts:

"That which no king before had done, I did..... A great wall which like a mountain cannot be moved..... I made of mortar and brick..... its foundations upon the bosom of the underworld I placed down deeply..... its top I raised mountains high..... great canals I dug and lined them with burnt brick laid in bitumen and brought abundant waters to all the people..... I paved the streets of Babylon with stone from the mountains..... Magnificent palaces and temples I have built..... Huge cedars from Mount Lebanon I cut down..... with radiant gold I overlaid them and with jewels I adorned them..... Giant bulls I made of bronze work and clothed them with dazzling gold..... With tiles of bright silver, the aisles of the shrines and the path of the temple I constructed."⁵

But the Hebrew prophets of captivity thundered out their denunciations, warning that the cities of Babylon would become:

"..... a desolation, a dry land, and a wilderness, a land wherein no man dwelleth....."⁶

"And wolves shall cry in their castles, and jackals in the pleasant palaces....."⁷

We were deeply moved as we stood upon the paved stones of the great Procession Street about which Nebuchadnezzar boasted, and visualized the stirring events of history which these mute remains might relate. The clear cut bas-

(3) Bible, Jeremiah, 51:37. (4) Bible, I Corinthians, 10:12. (5) Bible, Jeremiah, 51:43. (6) From Excavated Tablets. (7) Bible, Isaiah, 13:22.

reliefs of animals on the beautiful brick masonry remain as indifferent to us as to the passing of empires, but we saw in imagination the triumphal processions of conquerors, the bound and sad captives, the loot-laden slaves, marks of magnificent prosperity, of luxury and leisure for the few which were based on invasions and conquests, cruelty and the groaning oppressions of millions of wageless human beings forced to do the work of a great state. It is little wonder that Babylon was called "the bloody city."

Archaeologists read to us the story of the rise and fall of civilizations as they dig out the past from the discarded cradles of western civilization at Kish, Babylon, Nineveh, Ur of the Chaldees, Ctesiphon, Opis and other ancient capitals. But little notice has been given to a human tragedy of still greater significance to be read in the vast ruins of abandoned irrigation works.

The landscape of this ancestral home of western mankind is strewn with "tells" or mounds of cultural layers upon layers, and relics of buried cities and of fallen empires. To a Soil Conservationist it reveals an erosion and silt problem of tremendous and burdensome proportions, requiring orderly Government for the maintenance of the former vast irrigation works. Hundreds, yea, thousands of miniature mountain ranges of silt, whose tooth-like peaks form irregular skylines, divide this great alluvial plain of Mesopotamia into innumerable ridges set in herring bone pattern, reaching out on both sides of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. Man-made mounds of cities and towering ziggurats melt into insignificance when compared to these mountain ranges of silt which have mounted up higher and higher as untold millions of slaves and war captives toiled under the lash of overseers through centuries of time, digging out the silt from canals and carrying it up over ever-mounting banks, and returning for other loads.

This great alluvial plain of Mesopotamia is a garden or a desert depending entirely upon the maintenance or the neglect of its irrigation canals; for overhead rainfall is insufficient for agriculture. Ancient prosperity depended upon keeping these canals open. A standing army of slaves for this task was required to toil without ceasing on this endless removal of silt from the canals. Wars were waged and captives brought back in chains for this purpose. Little wonder the captive Jews "sat down by the waters of Babylon and wept"--the task was so hopeless, so unending. The Iraq Department of Irrigation estimates that the twin rivers bring down 4,000,000 cubic yards of silt annually. This mass of soil comes largely from the flanks of overgrazed mountains in the north whose lofty peaks are snow clad in winter, and from foothills where nomads have grazed their herds since long before the time of Abraham.

Our auto travel log, en route from Baghdad to Mosul, shows that in a stretch of 106 miles, we passed through 98 of these miniature mountain ranges of silt, sometimes 10, 20--up to 50 feet in height. As the canal walls mounted too high for the silt to be lifted over, it was found easier to dig a new canal beside the old one, which was then abandoned. The mountain building of silt cleanings then began all over again. Once our road passed through 11 consecutive canals with 22 ranges of silt banks. Each canal had been used until the banks had reached excessive heights and then a new canal was dug. Eleven large ancient canals had thus been abandoned, but the twelfth was a small live one which carried but a streamlet of water to a comparatively small area of land. It is common to cross three to six abandoned or dead canals beside a small live one.

Growth of ancient civilizations here depended on enlarging irrigation systems or works until these lands of Mesopotamia are estimated to have supported popula-

tions of from 30,000,000 to 50,000,000 people. They became rich, powerful, luxury loving and soft. Covetous eyes of food-hungry or land-hungry neighbors, the nomads of surrounding grassland regions, were cast toward the rich valley. The fierce shepherds swept down repeatedly upon the prosperous cities in this productive plain. Although they conquered, killed and pillaged, it was almost impossible to slay or exterminate such vast populations. It was silt that completed the desolation.

Invaders did not always destroy the irrigation works, although sometimes the rubble diversion weirs were opened as a part of military strategy. But if the irrigation canals were not maintained during wars or invasion, neglect soon destroyed their utility because of stoppage with silt. Lands then reverted to desert; cities famished immediately when irrigation and city water canals ceased to function. Destruction of a civilization was then swift and sure. Frequently centuries passed before new irrigation works could be constructed to support increasing populations. Too little emphasis in my opinion has been given to this silt problem as a cause for the repeated decline of these civilizations after invasions had swept over them. The land and these clogged irrigation canals have remained desert for 500 years since the whirlwind invasion of Tamerlane.

More significant than the ruins of cities and irrigation works are the less tangible but none the less real ruins of human liberties, initiative and equal opportunities which must have been enjoyed in the childhood of western mankind in this ancient home. Such ruins are fanatical, distorted and debased conceptions of man's relationships to his fellowmen, as well as dullness and apathy to human suffering and a depraved sense of fair play. Especially does the degraded status of woman hamper full development of the people who are like a crippled bird trying to fly with one wing. This old land has vast stores of oil, untold wealth for millions in the possibilities of a rejuvenated irrigation, but the greatest undeveloped resource of this country is its womanhood. When women have an inferior status as mothers in the home, in society, in religion, and in the state, they do not influence the citizenry in justice, human kindness and in loftiness of character as they might. Until women are given equal dignity and responsibility in moulding the youth of the land, one may expect a distorted social order. Debased human relationships are ruins which cry out the loudest in these lands of the "Cradle of Western Civilization."

Recently a new flame has been kindled in the minds of the people of Mesopotamia. The infant nation of Iraq, the twelfth nation to occupy the "Cradle of Western Civilization," has just been weaned from British protection and is beginning to toddle or walk alone. It has a population of only four to five million in this area which has supported eight to ten times that number. The new Government is beginning to rebuild ancient irrigation works and dams which will again transform deserts into gardens. We attended the dedication of the Kut Barrage or diversion dam, the first to be completed of a number of similar projects. In Iraq we see a promise of still another civilization to develop in this nursery of mankind. In restoring physical equipment, will it at the same time develop its spiritual equipment? Is it also doomed to rise, only to meet destruction and crumble to dust, ashes and salt, as have former civilizations?

Why have these civilizations risen and fallen? It fills one with wonder, consternation and incredulity to stand on these ruins and contemplate the desolation of this graveyard of cities, empires, cultures, and civilizations. All that is left of the fruit orchards of Babylon are some date palms and scattered willows along the river bank. The scanty population around Babylon live in a few mud hovels of poverty. The inhabitants are afflicted with illiteracy and low standards

of living--with no sewerage disposal, and with no water supply except that carried in pots on the head or in slimy goat skin bags. No trees are planted by canals for shade during scorching summers, or for fuel during the freezing winters.

Surrounding these descendants of the ancient civilizations, are ruins showing magnificence, opulence and learning, with handwritten tablets scattered about. A summer palace of 2600 years ago, outside the walls of Babylon, had cool underground rooms, dripping fountains, and gardens which to-day are rubbish of broken, glazed pottery and tile. Why should ancient civilizations have had running water, heating systems, sewers, paved streets, libraries, exquisite art, sculpture, palatial homes and surplus wealth to line their places of worship with silver and gold? Can it be that this magnificence was built for the few, upon oppressions and injustice of the people? Babylon--this great center of the ancient world has no counterpart in Iraq to-day. The glamour of "Arabian Nights" at Baghdad, the capital, disappears in twentieth century daylight. Climate has not changed in any important degree in historical times; the fertile alluvial soils are still productive when waters, and the great twin rivers, continue to pour out an abundance of waters even though silt laden, from the overgrazed and denuded flanks of lofty snow clad mountains far to the north. How then, can one account for the rise and fall of these civilizations?

Before the dawn of history, the children of Adam and Eve in this region began the long fight between the farmer and the shepherd. In fact we have a picture of the traditional stone which the Yazidee priests say Cain, the farmer, killed his brother Abel, the shepherd, who had allowed his herds to invade the crop lands of his brother. This appears to have taken place in the highlands east of Nineveh, where mankind may have first learned dry farming. A beautiful crop was ripening this spring, in spite of unknown millenia of cultivation. On the dry steppes on both sides of the Mesopotamia plain, are vast areas of splendid grazing lands when rains are plentiful. Here developed sturdy populations, which under strong leadership in time of famishing droughts, swooped down like wolves on sheep folds, to snatch food and life from the prosperous agriculturists of the plain. This contrast in living conditions, dependence of food supply and hardness of peoples was a constant hazard to the valley and repeatedly brought destruction of the more mature culture by wilder and more hardy peoples from the grasslands.

This leads to the observation that a nation may be more stable if it controls an entire geographical unit, i.e., the headwaters as well as the alluvial valleys of its rivers. Cooperation, rather than conflicts for food supply, is then possible, assuring a more lasting culture. Furthermore, this tremendous silt problem of the ages may be lessened when a nation controls the catchment areas of its streams and understands the relationship between floods and silt on the plains and denudation and erosion of the uplands and in the watersheds. Many millions of people have perished in floods of the Yellow River in China, yet until recent times little or no connection was realized between the silt in floods on lowlands and the cultivation and denudation of millions of acres far away in the watersheds of the river. In our United States, despite the rapid exploitation of our sloping agricultural lands, insufficient provision was made for silt control until the passage of the Soil Conservation Act of 1935 and the Omnibus Flood Control Act of 1936.

But there is more involved in the maintenance of a civilization than methods of land-use, vital as these are. Much depends on national organization, justice in administration and righteousness in Government. The growth of crops and the growth of the spirit are akin. Individual and national prosperity continue only

when the lands upon which the civilization depends for food, are maintained in a condition of sustained productiveness. The fate of a civilization is dependent upon the tiller of the soil. One or several generations can, and sometimes do, so wreck the lands and national resources of a people that its "golden age" or period of prosperity passes and the population is subjected to poverty and lower standards of living until there is little resemblance to its former wealth and abundance. Such decadence invites invasions and conquests. This transformation of lands and peoples has been found over and over again in these regions long occupied by man. Oppression of the farmer brings on exploitation of the land.

Out of the injustices, sorrows, broken spirits and ashes of vast populations and vanished civilizations, let there be distilled a pure essence of wisdom, gained from the experience of the past. Let us extract that which will give us the greatest assurance of longevity to our nation and to our culture. A nation must be healthy in spirit, as well as in body, to survive into the unknown future.

"Where there is no vision, the people perish....."⁸, is as true to-day as when proclaimed by the prophet of old. To maintain and sustain a civilization, the people must have an overpowering objective or goal demanding their allegiance. It must be altruistic, looking beyond individual interests of to-day so that it partakes of a religious zeal or responsibility. Its complete fulfillment must always remain in the future, but at the same time it must consist of concrete projects and tasks which can be undertaken and carried on by the people, unfolding an inclusive objective.

Since older civilizations have been brought to ignominious ends by destruction and exploitation, which wiped out physical and spiritual values and the glories and works of multitudes of people, let us seek an objective of construction rather than of destruction. Let us organize an army whose objective is conservation and the saving of values for the present and for the future. Only upon the conservation and wise use of our basic resources of land, water, and of the spirit of the people, can we maintain the human values of high standards of living, thinking, opportunity, freedom, justice and faith in the destiny of our civilization. And we must be ready to defend our purposes against all attacks.

Conservation of national resources, both material and human, becomes our vision and goal; it enlists the self interest of the individual and the altruistic motive to act for the present and future good of the nation. Realization that one belongs to a group that has come down from a long past and which, through conservation of the resources of the national home, has possibilities of long existence on the earth into the refulgent vistas of the future, furnishes an ethical motive for conservation. It must no longer be possible for individual or group exploitation to rob the present and future generations of their rightful inheritance, to condemn them to poverty and lower standards of living, or to subject them to the conquest of a foreign invader. Such acts must be considered and legislated as crimes against the State and society.

A "handwriting on the wall," in the form of our Soil Erosion Surveys, warns our nation that we have permitted erosion to destroy for further cultivation an area of our good lands greater than the State of Kansas, and that 200,000,000 acres more need the most advanced measures of erosion control and of the conservation of soil and rain waters to be applied by farmers and the help of a vast army of men for many years to come in order to reclaim and maintain them

for a permanent agriculture. Economic surveys show that these erosion ruined lands frequently transform farmers from active assets to liabilities of the community and the nation, requiring relief.

Thirty years ago, Nathaniel Shaler, noted geologist of Yale, attempted to arouse the American people by saying:

"Of all the sinful wasters of man's inheritance on the earth, and all are in this regard sinners, the very worst are the American people."

It is gratifying that a change in direction from exploitation to conservation has been made by the Soil Conservation Acts of 1935 and 1936, and the Omnibus Flood Control Act of 1936, but we have not proceeded far on the road to conservation in its fullest sense. Out of our vast stored resources our nation has grown to power and prosperity, but henceforth we must live on the maintenance and improvement of our remaining resources, or else we as a nation shall exchange our prosperity for decadence and lower standards of living, and for the possible menace of the invader. A tragic fate has already befallen many tillers of erosion ruined agricultural lands whose fields have turned to rocks or become riddled with gullies. The vast agricultural and irrigation ruins of former glorious civilizations in North Africa and these older lands of Asia Minor and the decadence of human and spiritual values make vivid to us the possible end of a great people. A permanent agriculture is vital to the rise and maintenance of a civilization, as well as to a rapid recovery after invasion.

The aggressor nations of to-day, who like to feel they are destined to dominate the world with their ideas by force and conquest of other lands have laid deep foundations for themselves in a permanent agriculture. In Germany, land-use and sustained productivity of forests are models of efficiency. Twenty years ago it was thought Germany was crushed;--to-day she is a menacing victor, threatening the peace of Europe. Italy is aflame with zeal for the cause of conservation; she is carrying out vast national projects of reclamation of old lands and making new lands habitable. The future well-being of the nation sweeps aside all else. "Believe! Obey! Fight!" is the bill-board slogan of Italy. Japan has become an example in reforestation and meticulous care in the conservation of farming land. The sense of security is sought in the control of land resources--sufficient to supply all the requirements of a people. Self-sufficiency is a goal born of mistrust between nations.

The world is faced with a choice between conquests and freedom of international trade. Freedom of international commerce to make available to nations the products of the earth's resources could be made to solve the most serious international problems far better than the destruction and staggering wastage of modern war, which destroys not only military objectives but civilian populations as well. And I hazard the suggestion that if all the wealth, all the human resources that are now being devoted to war and the preparation for war were to be directed toward conserving and enriching the land resources of the earth, and in the control and use of the waters of the land, the productiveness of the earth would yield sufficient to meet the requirements of this generation and its increase for many generations to come. The possibilities of the earth, when its resources are fully husbanded in the advanced knowledge of soil conservation, are far beyond the imagination of mankind in general. How much better if the vast energies of the human race could be directed toward such a goal of conservation than toward destruction.

The world has become more dangerous for our high purposes and ideals. We are the objects of envy; our wasteful land-use only invites invasion by land-hungry people, who are also excluded from trade with us by high tariff walls.

The fallen and vanquished civilizations are dead and cannot speak, but their ruins and the living remnants of their peoples, long sunk in a night of illiteracy, and dull from crushed, or suppressed higher human values, warn us to undertake a vast and healing program of conservation in its wider sense. In it are bound up self-preservation, altruism, justice, ethics, liberty, freedom and those realities which are the basis for democracy and its spiritual values. In conservation we have the assurance of continued progress in the search for that something which has led humanity out of the stone age to a modern mechanical age of development.

The rise and fall of civilizations is largely a record of the vanities and failures of ambitious kings. Well may we fear that the vanity of dictators, in their desire to dominate the world, will loose the annihilating fury of modern warfare and will plunge our much-vaunted modern civilization into a mausoleum of vanished cultures, where lie in dust and ashes the achievements of mankind during thousands of years of struggle.

If we make conservation, in its fullest conception, the goal for our people and for our national home and institutions, the American people may be destined to save the material and spiritual gains of mankind from the ruins of the destructive annihilations of war. We must be prepared to protect and to defend this torch of human progress and, despite the menaces of aggressors, to keep it aflame to light the path into the future. But without the maintenance of a permanent agriculture and conservation of national resources, neither can we nor any nation long endure the forces that have destroyed civilizations of the past.

Written at:

Beirut, Lebanon, Syria
April 15, 1939